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AUTHOR Parker, Garland G.
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ABSTRACT

Fluctuations in higher education enrollments in the 1970's are interpreted as they may affect enrollments in the next decade. For his analysis the author draws on his own study of enrollments in four-year colleges in 1976-77 as well as other data. Some attention is given to these factors in the future: long-range planning; "endangered species" of students, administrators, and institutions; administrative considerations; full-time students; financial aid; international education; nontraditional students; and innovative programs. (MSE)

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Topical Paper No. 8

HIGHER EDUCATION ENROLLMENTS: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE 1980's.

Garland G. Parker

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HIGHER EDUCATION ENROLLMENTS: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE 1980's

by

Garland G. Parker
Executive Director
Office for Enrollment Policy and Educational Research
and
Professor
History and Educational Research

Higher Education Program
College of Education
University of Arizona

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June, 1977

HIGHER EDUCATION ENROLLMENTS: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE 1980's.

The integration of enrollment data into the mainstream of American life and culture and their interpretation in terms of their actual or potential impact upon people and institutions are the areas in which I hope I have some contribution to make.[1] I do not presume either to have command of all of the facts nor the answers to all the questions pertaining to the present or the future. At the same time, I do have sole possession of some unique sets of enrollment data on a national basis and am glad to share with you some hopefully valid or, at least, provocative and stimulating analyses and interpretations of them. Indeed, there is room and need for all of us to exercise the maximum of analytical and interpretive capacity we have in unraveling the present and future enrollment enigmas.

BACKGROUND: 1945 TO 1975

As an historian, I view enrollments in their historical frame of reference and as a part of the mainstream of American society and life. To understand the present, we need a quick look at the enrollment backdrop in the 1945-1975 period. In those years, enrollments grew from some 1.6 million to almost eight million, an increase of 372 percent, and a continually appreciating economy came to be the accepted norm in higher education. In the 1970-1973 interval, however, although enrollments increased overall, in many segments they faltered, leveled off, or declined disastrously, and a near-static situation developed. The resultant shock to the higher education community was serious.

There were many reasons for this development, but it is important to understand that after much adjustment in academia and readjustments in society enrollments experienced a resurgence in 1973-1975. Indeed, in 1975-76, the final report of the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) tabulated 11,240,187 students for a phenomenal increase of 8.9 percent. As we consider enrollments for 1976-77, it may be noted that my study of enrollments for that year in the four-year schools was to be published on April 20 and that on the two-year schools on April 30, but I am drawing in part, of course, now on the results of these two studies.

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[1]The author wishes to acknowledge his reliance in this paper upon the indispensable research undertaken in the preparation of his annual studies on national collegiate enrollments now published as ACT Special Reports by the American College Testing Program. See complete citations of the 1975-76 and 1976-77 reports in the bibliography.

A CRUCIAL YEAR - 1976-77

The enrollment renaissance in the 1974-75 years and the still potential pools of full-time students that seemed to provide a base for at least modest increases in the immediately succeeding years created a false sense of security. An air of optimism prevailed about enrollment expectations in 1976-77, and state as well as institutional budgets reflected a rosy view. These budgets, however, were tied to headcount and FTE projections that depended upon the showing of the expected students for realization. The NCES projected a 4.5 percent overall increase for 1976-77.

But there were indications of decline in the summer of 1976. In the first six months of 1976, applications did appear to be running ahead of the prior year, but by midsummer, early signs of decline, readjustment, or shortfall began to show themselves. In our own situation at the University of Cincinnati, by July 1, our lead in applications over 1975 had lessened; it declined further by August 1, and we were behind on September 1. Meanwhile, telephone calls to me from institutional as well as book company representatives indicated a nationwide souring of the enrollment situation. In several regional and national meetings I attended in September or early October, I felt the enrollment pulse nationally on a sampling basis and found it subsiding.

Meanwhile, early returns on our University of Cincinnati - ACT special-report enrollment questionnaires were pouring into my office; and by early October, I knew or thought I knew, that I was sitting on the major enrollment newsbreak for the last quarter century. I felt an obligation to share this information nationally as soon as possible, even though the news was unwelcome to most of us. My national press release on October 19, based on returns from 688 schools, indicated a possible decline of up to one percent in grand total enrollment. The reaction across the country was one of consternation, shock, and surprise, and the initial reaction at NCES was that Parker was too pessimistic. Even so, a later release by NCES on November 9, 1976, indicated no more than a 0.4 percent increase, and finally, a second NCES sampling on February 3, 1977, reported the grand total enrollment nationally had dropped 0.7 percent and that the final 1976 total probably would fall between the +0.4 percent rise and the -0.7 percent decrease. Meanwhile, in the final manuscripts of my two studies on four-year and two-year colleges that were released to the press on February 9 and February 25, 1977, respectively (but before I knew about the NCES February 3 report), I had revised my own October 19 report to suggest that the final national enrollment decline would be about 0.2 percent. Understandably, I think, I take a certain amount of what I trust is pardonable pride in the statistical results of my enrollment studies for 1976-77.

The fact that grand total enrollments declined by 0.2 percent or more for the first time since 1951 makes 1976-77 a crucial year in the history of American higher education. While this probably is not the watershed year for enrollments reflective of the yet to come demographic decline, it provided an agonizing preview of what the implications may be of future losses related to potential downward trends in enrollment. The general results are one thing, but how did the total decline for 1976-77 show itself within the matrix of overall enrollments?

The details are set forth in the two larger ACT Special Reports, but some of the specific results may be set forth as follow:

1. *Grand total enrollments in the four-year schools covered* in my study declined .8 percent and among them the private schools fared better percentagewise than did the public institutions. In the two-year schools covered, the grand total was up but only by 0.2 percent, in comparison to 16 percent in the previous year.

2. *Full-time students.* In the full-time student category, there was a marginal gain of 0.2 percent in the four-year schools. Even though this was a small gain, it was in contrast to an important loss in part-time students, contrary in itself to the pattern of recent years. In the two-year schools, the full-time student count was down by 3.5 percent. With full-time students accounting for 71.6 percent of the enrollments in the four-year schools, and 44.9 percent of those in the two-year units, it is obvious that full-time students not only are important but fundamental in the higher education arena.

In both the four-year and two-year institutions, on a percentage basis, the private schools fared better than their public counterparts in 1976-77.

3. *Part-time students.* The hidden surprise in the enrollment package for 1976-77 was the reversal in the increasing trend in part-time students. There was a loss of 3.2 percent in the four-year schools, and in the two-year institutions, where part-timers increased 14 percent last year, the gain was only 3.7 percent in 1976-77. Part-time students certainly demonstrated that they cannot be taken for granted.

4. *Other important enrollment movements in the four-year schools* included a drop of 0.1 percent in law schools, a rise in medical schools of 4.7 percent, a significant decline of 5.4 percent in graduate students, and a decrease in urban enrollments of 21.5 percent.

5. *Technical/vocational enrollments in the two-year schools* continued to increase by 5.3 percent in the units where such registrations could be identified.

6. *Women.* In the four-year units, women exceeded the march of the men with a gain of 1.4 percent and accounted for 46.3 percent of the total, compared to 45.4 percent in 1975-76. The women also gained on the men in the two-year schools with a 6.3 percent increase and comprised 48.6 percent of all two-year students.

7. *Veteran students.* The total college-level enrollment of all veterans was 1,167,582, a 33.4 percent decrease or some 586,707 potential students.

8. *Freshmen.* One bright spot in the enrollment picture was in the count of freshman students. In the four-year schools, there was an increase of 3.7 percent, and in the two-year institutions the rise was 8.4 percent.

Reasons for enrollment turnabout in 1976-77

Although we cannot be definitive in response, a question of great interest to all is "What are the reasons for the enrollment turnabout in 1976-77?" There are some factors that appear to have been operative.

In the first place, after the massive increases of enrollments in both two- and four-year schools in 1975-76, it was unrealistic to expect another large increase for the next year without a significant change in the demographic base underlying all college enrollments. This of course was not the case. A basic fact often overlooked is that, despite the lag of enrollments under projections, the nation still enrolled a huge number of students in 1976-77 that was practically equal to the 1975-76 figures, which were the largest in national history. Also, it is important to recall that vast numbers of students re-entered the academic mainstream at the collegiate level in 1975-76 in response to severe job scarcity resulting from the recession conditions that prevailed in the nation's economy in 1975. With the improvement of economic conditions and employment in the first six months of 1976, many of these students returned to the job market. With the slowdown of business and higher unemployment in the summer months of 1976, however, many other potential and former students either decided to or were precluded from enrollment in the autumn of the same year. The expiration of GI benefits in June, 1976, for millions of veterans accounted for a decrease of over 33 percent in veterans enrolled with such benefits for 1976-77; the impact of the loss of these potential students (that may have exceeded 500,000 in the nation as a whole) upon all colleges was severe. Many women, minority persons, and adults generally were impeded in their collegiate enrollment by the economic slowdown. It appears possible, also, that the market for adult and continuing education courses and programs may have become saturated, at least temporarily. Meanwhile, the ever increasing inflation, the continued rise in student fees, and limitations on financial aid all were undoubted reasons for the enrollment slowdown for 1976-77.

Impact of enrollment shortfall in 1976-77.

What was the impact of the 1976-77 shortfall in enrollments? Some observations here may give us some preview of the future, if enrollments follow demographic trends downward in the years ahead. For almost all schools in the nation, in a time of dire financial need, the enrollment lag meant a critical loss in funds, either in fees or tuition income, state funding, or both. The results of the enrollment stall will affect the course of and the funding of higher education in the next several years because of the restricted enrollment base on which to project student counts in the years just ahead. The loss of over three percent in part-time enrollments in the four-year schools will have significance for the status and future of many continuing and adult education programs that have been mounted in recent years. For the students who did enroll in 1976-77, there may be more room, more open courses, better advising, and, perhaps, better educational opportunities in general. For would-be admissions applicants, there is and will be more intensified and competitive recruitment among the schools seeking them. For faculties and those seeking jobs in higher education, the 1976-77 enrollment developments were not encouraging. Money for salary increases and program improvement will be scarcer and job openings fewer. Class and student loads for faculty probably will be increased. There may be serious cutbacks ordered by administrations and boards that will result in job losses even for some formerly employed. Assuredly, the enrollment turnaround in 1976-77 has had and will continue to have serious negative impact on higher education in general.

Was the enrollment downturn in 1976-77 temporary or longterm?

In answering this question, we should emphasize that the 1976-77 decrease was not the long predicted decline for the 1980's reflecting demographic trends that soon will show themselves. In reality, the 1976-77 enrollment developments resulted from a combination of factors peculiar to that year, some of which will have protracted influence in coming years and others that may or may not do so. We will not regain lost ground in veteran enrollments, and there are lesser annual gains to be expected in women, minority, adult, and continuing education contingents than was true in the 1970-75 period.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE: THE 1970's AND 1980's.

What is the portent for collegiate enrollments and the institutions they will so vitally affect in the remaining 1970's and the 1980's? There are some massive imponderables that bear upon that future. A big question is what the course of the economy will be in the Carter administration and what the effect of Carter programs will be on higher education? Will inflation continue, and, if so, at what level? How adequate will be state appropriations for higher education?

What will be the level of Federal Government largess, and how generous will private donors be? With welfare programs, national defense, urban rehabilitation, prison reform, rapid transit, education below college, national health programs, and energy needs in line for consideration, how will higher education fare in the economic, social, and governmental marketplaces? These are vital questions pertaining to the future of higher education, but the existing circumstances in themselves provide little reason for great optimism in respect to answers favorable to higher education.

Prospects for the remaining 1970's.

Although the extent of the enrollment decline in 1976-77 was as much a surprise to me as it was to many others, I have always predicted that enrollments would continue to rise in the remaining 1970's and perhaps through 1980-81. The demographic data tend to support this premise to the extent of an average rise of from 0.5 to one percent per year. Barring unforeseen developments or disasters, and with much trepidation, I have forecast an enrollment increase of some two percent in 1977-78.

A look ahead into the 1980's.

If the historic mix of collegiate enrollments continues in the 1980's, the national birthrate and forecasts of high school graduates indicate that enrollments yet may rise slightly in the 1970's, decline slowly in the early 1980's, and then fall off sharply in the later years of that decade. Data provided to this author by NCES indicate the peak year for national degree-credit collegiate enrollments will be in 1982-83, with a top figure of 11,369,000, and that the crest year for total degree-credit and non degree-credit enrollment will be 1983-84, with an estimated 13,629,000 students. The judgment of this observer is that the collegiate-level peak may be reached in 1980-81 or 1981-82. The decline thereafter in potential high school graduates is such that an enrollment decrease of twenty-five to thirty percent by the end of the decade of the eighties is quite possible.

The potentiality of such decline, however, does not indicate that a decrease of such magnitude is inevitable in the 1980's nor that the developments in that decade would be necessarily all bad. There are problems ahead, but, also there are promises, if we have the vision, the vigor and the resources to grasp and realize them. For the first time in our history, we can expect to have the faculty, the expertise, the time, the facilities, and, presumably, the interest and concern, to support programs for significant student groups which, heretofore, have not occupied prominent places in the educational scene. The big question is whether or not we will have the finances and social support necessary to fund and

sponsor the altered service functions that are possible and desirable in the 1980's. In our planning, if we undertake effectively to demonstrate the need, we have to assume the requisite finances and support will be forthcoming. Month by month, I become less confident of success in this effort, but any other course almost assures academic bankruptcy to the detriment not only of the schools, but also the society as well.

IMPLICATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

What are the larger implications deriving out of the present and anticipated future circumstances that merit our considered attention? Many of them already have been referenced or alluded to, but an elaboration is in order at this point.

1. *Long-range planning.* There should be the highest priority upon long-range institutional planning now and in the later 1970's for the leaner years ahead. True, many institutions as well as public and private agencies supportive of them already are undertaking measures to counteract potential losses and to improve the educational delivery system. The institution that waits until "1984," however, to plan for that long heralded date may find it already is or soon may be too late.

2. *Endangered species.* Without such planning ahead, there likely will be a number of endangered species in the academic environment. These could comprehend not only certain student categories, but also faculty and administrators, and even many institutions, both public and private. Also, some of the tender plantings in the academic garden over the last decade, such as educational development programs for minority and disadvantaged groups, studies related to women and ethnic groups, and various other innovative curricular developments could be among the first victims of the academic budget knife.

3. *Other implications.* Although faculties may view the prospects negatively, legislators, governors, state boards, other support groups, and society as a whole will view with favor increased emphasis on better advising, teaching improvement, and, indeed, all possible efforts to enhance teacher productivity and effectiveness. At the same time, inconsistent though it may seem to be, larger classes and heavier student loads loom likely for faculty in future years. Along the same academic way, research activities and graduate programs are likely to be trimmed by the financial pruning hook. We may anticipate the closure of some building facilities, the renovation of others for academic uses for purposes other than those for which they were designed, and the closure or conversion of residence halls for the use of senior citizens, continuing education activities, and the like. Expensive athletic programs,

such as football, that usually require institutional subsidy for survival will come increasingly under fire, along with the more expensive and oft-times duplicative academic programs. Faculty positions will be fewer, and many retained professors may face the need for academic retooling in order to survive in the more spartan institutional environment. We can be hopeful that none or not many of these dour possibilities will become realities, but without concerted, determined, and positive action by all parties interested in and supportive of academia, I am convinced that they will do so.

Promises of the future.

Surely, we have given adequate attention to the problems of higher/postsecondary education in the future. May we now consider some of the promises of the future with emphasis on the student groups and services on which rest the potentialities for survival and even progress in American higher education. It is possible and even mandatory for all institutions to exert every possible effort to serve new and expanded clientele groups in the potential school population.

1. *Full-time students.* Full-time students at all levels will continue to be fundamentally important in our major institutional programs, functions, services, and finances. The institution that ignores or slights them in its planning and operation for the future will do so at its own peril.

2. *Financial aid for needy students.* Granted that there are some students who may be maladjusted academically and perhaps should not even be there, there still are millions in the current collegiate-age cohorts who are barred from attendance by excessive fees and inadequate personal finance. If fees can be held within reasonable limits, if financial aid can be extended to more of the needy, and if the latter can be motivated more highly to enter postsecondary higher education institutions, the projected decline in the number of high school graduates entering college can be slowed and in some states, perhaps, even halted.

3. *International education.* Another possible promising area is the growth of international education. As faculty, space, facilities, and programs become more flexible and available in a depreciating student economy, there will be an increased interest in the gearing of academic programs more to the needs of foreign students at all levels and for varied purposes, ranging from short-term technical or vocational training courses, to full-blown doctoral programs. While this observer is highly supportive of an adequate defense system, he is convinced of the high dividends and positive returns in foreign relations that may and should be forthcoming from a sound set of programs in international education.

4. *Non traditional students.* Another promising program area is the increase of services to so-called non traditional students, inclusive of various groups of women, minorities, adults, and continuing education, and, particularly, part-time students. Recently, Senator Richard S. Schweiker of Pennsylvania stated that "one-third of all college students are over the age of 25, and a remarkable ten percent—nearly one million students—are over the age of 35." He stated further that forty-eight percent of all college students were over the age of 21 and that in 1974, 37.1 percent were part-time students; whereas, in 1970, the part-time student population was only twenty-nine percent. It is a safe premise that these more mature adult students have needs and interests quite different from those of the traditional corps of eighteen-year-old students that enter college right out of high school.

5. *Innovative programs.* There should be priority, also, in the higher education community in the expansion of present policies and development of innovative programs pertaining to credit-by-examination, experiential learning evaluation, independent study, consortium arrangements, and the design of special and irregularly scheduled academic programs suitable for those population segments to whom these matters are important.

No doubt, there are other approaches not only to the maintenance but also to the improvement of the nation's higher education system. Indeed, there is need for all concerned persons in and out of higher education to set their minds and institutional systems to work at the academic and educational creativity for which there will be such an increasing need in the future. Constructive and vigorous attention needs to be given to all areas of promise on behalf of higher education in the days ahead.

Even so, as optimistic as he would like to be, this observer must revert to a position of practical pessimism and state that he sees no way in which all the slack from the demographic decline can be taken up in the 1980's. At the very minimum, we must anticipate a fifteen to twenty percent enrollment loss from the peak of the 1970's to the nadir of the 1980's, and we must be sobered by the thought that without attention to corrective and compensating measures, the loss could be as high as twenty-five to thirty percent.

SUMMARY

By way of summary and conclusion, this observer takes the position that while emphasis must be placed upon the foreseeable circumstances that imply great problems in the future that give rise to increasing pessimism, there is an ever greater need to be aware and supportive of the promises in our education future. If our institutions prepare appropriately and if we can garner the

requisite support from all possible parties, both public and private, enrollments in the 1980's may not always be conceived of as crisis concerns, but could provide a field of promise that may yield heretofore unattainable harvests. To some extent, the future may be affected positively by the efforts of those in the higher education community and its supporters. Information concerning the problems as well as the promises must be communicated to donors, the public, and governance groups at the state and national levels in the most effective manner possible. Not only is the provision of quality higher education important for the children and grandchildren of the present generation, but also it has a vital relationship to the future of the nation in the appropriate training of the educated and responsible citizenry necessary for the effective operation of the system of representative democracy in this land.

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